

10 Things Any School Can Do to Build Parent Involvement

. . . Plus Five Great Ways to Fail!

by John H. Wherry

1. **Help parents understand why they are so important to their children's school success.** Point out to parents how much time children spend at home vs. at school (birth to H.S. graduation 15% at school, 85% home & other). Remind parents that they are their children's first & most influential teachers-and that education training is unnecessary. Remind parents how well children mimic them, even when parents don't want them to. Help parents understand how to model the behaviors they want. Discuss in parent meetings, newsletters: How soon children start learning. How children copy parents. How parents can set an example. How to make use of "bits and pieces" of time with children. Why parents really are children's first & most influential teachers
2. **Give parents specific things they can do to help their children.** Parents say they don't know what to do. Parents say they don't have time. Specific suggestions help. Practical Strategies: Class by class, or schoolwide, decide on 3 to 5 specific things you would like parents to do at home: 1) Read to your child every day. 2) Ask about school work every day. 3) Tell your child 'I love you' every day. 4) Talk with your child and listen to what she has to say every day. Be Specific With Parents. Provide specific ideas in many ways: Tell parents face to face. Give them handouts. Show them videos. Demonstrate ideas at meetings. Parents have as many learning styles as their children. When we specifically target what we want, we often get it!
3. **Work to win parents' endorsement of your school's educational program.** Parents and educators are often different-and always will be. We share a common interest in the well-being of the children. We should respect parents' expertise. We can build respect for school expertise. Win Parents' Endorsement: Parents and schools each bring unique strengths to the education of children. We are a TEAM. We each have strengths, weaknesses-neither of us can do the job alone. Respect must be the basis of our relationship. Practical Strategies: Discuss each other's strengths at parent and staff meetings. Discuss how we can support each other. Share your school's educational goals-and how you plan to accomplish them.
4. **Give parents the specific information they want.** Do you know parents' top concerns? How can you find out? How can you stay up to date? Here are the results of over 100 opinion polls What is being taught? How is it being taught? How are school funds spent? How are school policies formed? How would parents at your school rank these topics? Discipline Peer pressure Motivation Self-esteem Inclusion ADD & ADHD
5. **Know how to get parents to READ what you send home.** One sheet of paper is best. Use 4th to 6th grade reading level. Know the 30-3-30 Rule: 80% of the people will spend just *30 seconds* reading what you send home; 19% will spend just *3 minutes*; 1% will spend *30 minutes*. Use the dollar bill test: A dollar bill, placed any direction, should touch some graphic element-such as: a bullet, rule, picture, screen, boldface type, underline, different color, etc. Practical Strategies: Learn what parents want to know. Provide it very briefly. Provide it frequently. Remember-you are not talking to an audience, but a parade!
6. **Provide staff training and support for parent involvement.** Most educators have had no such training. Many fear parents and avoid them. Training and support build understanding-which overcomes fear. Staff Training and Support: Share research findings. Jointly develop ideas the whole school can implement. Jointly develop ideas individual staff members can implement. Provide a steady drip of parent involvement information. Spotlight successful staff practice. Provide non-threatening social activities so staff can meet parents. More Strategies: Ask staff with successful experience to talk with others. Invite speakers to staff meetings. Hold school workshops. Make telephones and note cards available to staff.
7. **Provide training and support for parents.** Most parents have had no involvement training Many fear educators and avoid them. Training and support build understanding-which overcomes fear. Share research findings-parents are interested, too. Help parents share ideas with each other (network). Jointly develop a list of important topics. Provide non-threatening social activities so parents and staff can meet. Stress the importance of what parents do every day at home.

8. **Recognize and Reward Exemplary Parent Involvement Practice.** Most parents and staff are starved for recognition and encouragement. A little makes a big difference! Recognize Exemplary Practice of Staff: The most parent phone calls. The most home visits. The most notes to parents. The best idea to involve parents. The most parent visits to class. The most parent group members. Recognize Exemplary Practice of Parents: The most books read aloud. The most improved grades. The most class visits. The most help to teachers. The best idea to help their child. The most help to your parent group.
9. **Ensure Your Success by Making a Plan** Specifically, how will you get staff involved? Specifically, what will you ask parents to do? We Must Have a Plan Having a plan does not guarantee success. Not having a plan does guarantee failure!
10. **Adapt Ideas That Have Worked for Others.** Why try to reinvent the wheel? There are lots of proven ideas ready for you to use: Remember the 3 Fs for success: 1) Food, 2) Families, 3) Fun. Establish a friendly contact early in the year-In Time of Peace! Remember to stress Two-Way communication.

Five Great Ways to Fail!

1. **Think of yourself as the main parent involvement person at your school.** School Survey Results: "Can you give me the names of any people you know who work up at school?" 10 School Secretary, 2) Custodian, 3) Food Service/Bus Driver, 4) A Veteran Teacher, 5) A Music Teacher, 6) Nurse/Coach 7) The Principal.
2. **Think of parent involvement as something that only happens when parents are in your school building.** By Far, the Most Important Involvement Happens at Home! Reading to children. Being seen reading. Setting an example (for better or worse). Showing interest in school work. And MUCH more!
3. **Try to build positive attitudes among parents by just using newsletters, memos, newspaper articles, TV, other mass media.** Mass Media is Best for Providing Information. All mass media-radio, TV, signs, bumper stickers-can do is reinforce attitudes that already exist! Use Face-to-Face Contact for Creating and Changing Attitudes: Conferences. Workshops. Home Visits. Class Visits. Open House. Even Phone Calls.
4. **Keep on thinking that children from 'broken' or 'disadvantaged' homes do not have the benefit of parent involvement.** The 'Extended Family' These Children Often Have is Amazing. Mother/Father, Grandparents, Neighbors, Sisters, Aunts, Uncles, Friends. We Need to Enlist Their Support! Children often have many people who can and will help if we will invite them to get involved-and help them know what to do.
5. **Write parents off as apathetic & uninterested after you repeatedly provide programs for them and invite them to come to school, but they don't show up!** The Vast Majority of Parents Want to Help Their Children. We need to: 'Walk a Mile' in their shoes. Respect what they now do to help their children. Issue 'genuine invitations.'

In Conclusion . . . Getting parents involved in their children's education is not just a 'nice idea' We can't DO OUR JOB without parents' help! We Know How to Make Parent Involvement Work: In ANY school . . . With very LITTLE MONEY . . . Using PROVEN, TESTED IDEAS. The fact is . . . A New Day is Dawning! It is the day of parent involvement. It will help every child, in every school, everywhere . . . and we are exactly the ones who can make it happen!

This information was prepared by Dr. John H. Wherry, President, The Parent Institute, P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474, 1-800-756-5525. The Parent Institute publishes parent involvement materials for schools, including the *Educators' Notebook on Family Involvement* newsletter for staff, the *Parents make the difference!*, *Parents STILL make the difference!*, *Helping Children Learn*, *Helping Students Learn* and *Building Readers* newsletters for schools to distribute to parents, as well as informative booklets, pamphlets and videotapes for schools to distribute to parents. Permission is granted for noncommercial professional reproduction of this summary if this credit message is included.

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